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**Citation for published version:**

Ruwanpura, K, Chan, L, Brown, B & Kajotha, V 2020, 'Unsettled peace? The territorial politics of roadbuilding in post-war Sri Lanka', *Political Geography*, vol. 76, 76, pp. 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102092>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102092](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102092)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Political Geography

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## Unsettled Peace? The territorial politics of roadbuilding in post-war Sri Lanka

### Abstract

This paper analyses the role of roadbuilding as a processes of state territorialisation in post-war Sri Lanka. In the aftermath of a brutal civil war (1983-2009), and in lieu of a broader peace and reconciliation process between Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities, road infrastructure has been promoted by the state as essential to the region's recovery and nation's sovereignty. Roads were to bring national unity and political integration. We interrogate such claims, drawing on fieldwork conducted in Jaffna and neighbouring areas to cast doubt on the prospects of new roads to ameliorate ethnic tensions. Rather, as militarised security discourses and policies continue to dominate the Sri Lankan public sphere, such schemes can be understood as part of broader Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project to consolidate territorial control in restive parts of the country. Our research suggests that, rather than facilitating rehabilitation and recovery, road networks mirror pre-existing fault lines and entrench the privileged position of the military in Sri Lankan society. Such shifts do little to avail persistent minority sentiments of political marginalisation, aggravating social fractures and re-constituting the hegemony of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, road infrastructure, peacebuilding, territorialisation, securitisation

### Introduction:

*"As we had got off the tuk-tuk near the small kade (boutique), a man at the shop asks in Tamil, 'why are you here?' I thought I sensed aggression in the question – which must be because we had inquired whether there was a Sinhala village in the area...."*

These excerpts from the first authors' fieldnotes recount fieldwork encounters travelling to Navatkuli (a village adjacent to the A9 highway linking Jaffna and Colombo), and intimate at the residual sense of mistrust that prevails between communities in the former warzones of Northern Sri Lanka. The previous day, when we were travelling to Kodikamam, a Buddhist temple to the right was noticed, and we had a discussion about why that temple was built there? VK mentioned that there was a Sinhala village adjacent to it, which was probably

worthy of exploring, given as it was on the A9 route; which is what led to our visit the next day. This visit, and our subsequent visits to the village, were instructive for revealing what roads signified to the different communities – in Navatkuli, the Tamil and Sinhala people. We open our paper with two contrasting perspectives of what the post-war context has meant for the lives of Tamil and Sinhala villagers residing in the vicinity of newly built and reconstructed roads.

*"The Buddhist temple and statue has not been there for more than five years. In 2008, as the area was recaptured by the state, overnight a settlement came up with 56 Sinhala families being resettled and the army hastily constructing takaran (aluminium) shacks. Some families had come voluntarily while others, we are told, were forcibly relocated. The setting up of a Sinhala village created a lot of tension at the time, about who owns the land and whether outsiders can be resettled like that overnight – not even the local MP and GS (gramasevaka – village official) seemed to have any idea... Local Tamil families feel aggrieved because some of us do not have land and property to live, and yet outsiders were relocated here and given houses... Only a few of those families had ever lived in the Jaffna area before..."*

- Tamil rendition

*"We used to live near the Jaffna railway station before the war began. Some of us were initially displaced to Mihintale, others to Anuradhapura – because of the purge by the LTTE... We moved here in 2008 and prior to us settling in this village, it was a LTTE guhuwa (stronghold). While we were away, we have had children and grandchildren, and they are quite settled in Mihintale or Anuradhapura; they didn't want to move and only visited here. This is partly because there are not any Sinhala-language schools in the area.... The A32 is a real boon to keep these family connections going; it connects one area with another because of the Poonakary bridge and eases travel...the roads are smooth and our bus journey is quicker...."*

- Sinhala rendition

Nearly a decade on from a long and bloody civil war, roads offers vital insights into Sri Lanka's still fraught territorial politics. In the postcolonial era, 'ethnic' tensions between Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities have simmered over the hegemony of Sinhala-Buddhist

nationalists within state institutions.<sup>1</sup> Grievances erupted in sporadic outbursts of political violence before descending into war. From 1983-2009, the Sri Lankan state was locked in an armed struggle with the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), separatists who sought to establish an independent Tamil state in the North and East of the country. International attempts to broker peace were met with little success, and under President Rajapaksa (2005-2015), whose 'soft authoritarian' and nationalist agenda alarmed political observers, fighting intensified until the LTTE conceded defeat in May 2009 (Jazeel and Ruwanpura 2009). Following its military victory, a triumphant Sri Lankan government declared its ambitions to bring peace and stability through reconstruction and development. Rajapaksa displayed little interest in making overtures to the aggrieved Tamil minority, having treated the conflict as a 'law and order' issue, and his administration prioritised security and economic growth over ethnic reconciliation (Kelegema 2015: 242; Venugopal 2018). Twenty-six years of armed conflict left behind a landscape scattered with landmines, checkpoints, military hideouts, and other artefacts of war; and a renewed push for infrastructure lay at the heart of state strategy for regional stabilisation and recovery. Across the North and East of the country, where violence had been concentrated, roads were badly damaged and destroyed, left marred by potholes and in a state of disrepair. Under the patronage of international donors and agencies, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and subsequently bilateral loans, the Sri Lankan state embarked on a major roadbuilding scheme. In both its ten-year National Road Master Plan, published shortly before the end of the conflict (2007), and in its *Mahinda Chintana* (Vision for the Future) policy framework (2010), the government hailed the potential of new highways for their ability to transform economic prospects and enhance trade competitiveness. Since then, roads have come to constitute a central tenet of the state's neoliberal vision for a new and unified Sri Lanka, embodying the promise of modernity, mobility and economic 'progress'.

Scholarship on roads and transport corridors has grown in recent years. It considers the diverse social imaginaries associated with new road infrastructures, the role of road-building infrastructure as an articulation of state power, and the effects this might have on how social

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<sup>1</sup> The bombings on Easter Sunday (April 21<sup>st</sup> 2019) and the recent and yet again outbursts of violence targeting Muslims and minorities more generally partly signifies the tense undercurrents that have existed between and within communities; and how Sri Lanka's political grievances remain unresolved – although focusing on Muslim-Sinhala relations is not the focus of this paper.

relations are (re)constituted at different scales (Anand 2006; Dagalou and Harvey 2012; Ennis 2018; Harvey and Knox 2015; Larkin 2013; Masquelier 2002; Rankin et al 2018; Sabhlok 2017). However, experiences of roads differ markedly in post-war or transitional contexts where socio-spatial dislocation produce very different effects to what might occur in a peacetime setting. The casualties and the disruption caused by war tends to unsettle claims to land and intrude upon political memory, which has been the case in Sri Lanka where 40,000 civilians are estimated to have died (UN Panel of Experts 2011). They also complicate reconstruction efforts and reshaping the ways in which new material infrastructures are negotiated and contested (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Klem 2014; Unruh and Shalaby 2012). Within post-war Sri Lanka, the arrival of new roads – often built under the supervision of the military and bound up with processes of displacement and resettlement – breeds a potent mix of suspicions, anxieties, hopes and desires (see also: Kelegama 2015, Thirangama 2012). Roads are conceived of as auxiliaries to broader development agendas, designed to stabilise and legitimate political rule in the aftermath of war. This insight opens up new lines of enquiry, concerning the complex relations between infrastructure, social unrest and processes of brokerage and alliance building within the wider polity. However, the contingent and variable effects of roadbuilding in post-conflict Sri Lanka have yet to be fully explored.

The newfound enthusiasm for roadbuilding schemes presents an opportunity to contemplate how movement is enabled or enhanced by such infrastructural forms. It also correspondingly, reflects on whose lives are interrupted or disconnected as roads cut across the landscape and reconfigure socio-spatial relations in a manner that railways did during the colonial era (Thiranagama 2012; see also Ahuja 2002). Taking as our point of departure the Sri Lankan government's professed desire to secure the sovereignty of the nation through a dense network of roads, we interrogate militarised discourses of security, territoriality and development that pervades it. Differently from existing post-war literature on Sri Lanka, by focusing in on roads we show how they become a mechanism for the state to exercise power over populations and territory. It does so by simultaneously disrupting existing mobilities and creating new ones; and as state-spaces, roads are prone to actualise specific relational discontinuities through calculated interventions that fix space to limit the parameters of future land-use (Harvey and Knox 2015; Ennis 2018). Our discussion centres on the A32 between Jaffna and Navatkuli, a key link road which connects onto the A9, the major highway between urban centres in the North and Colombo, the nation's capital.

Map 1 and 2 here

By focusing on these strategic transport arteries, we develop our argument concerning the instrumental use of roads to manage populations under the guise of both 'development' and 'security', exercising power to further the aims of both a militarised capitalism and Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism. In doing so, we aim to contribute to emerging body of literature addressing the effects of infrastructure development in warzone or post-conflict settings, environments where stabilisation acquires a privileged status in guiding state policy (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Klem 2014; Rankin et al 2018; Unruh and Shalaby 2012). Hence, in this paper, we analyse the role of roadbuilding as a constitutive process of the Sri Lankan state in its quest to secure legitimacy and consolidate national sovereignty (see also Thiranagama 2012 for railways). We begin by briefly outlining our research methods, before proceeding to investigate the political significance of roads, mobility and connectivity within Sri Lanka's fractured post-war landscape.

### **Fragments from the field**

Undertaking research on roads is necessarily a fragmented and fragmentary process, requiring movement between a stretch of road and locating field sites that were under construction or had been recently completed. We identified three such pivotal sites within the A9 road, a major road and key transport artery connecting Jaffna with urban centres in the South; and we worked together with a trilingual **local researcher from the Jaffna area** over a nine-month period (January-August 2017). As a co-author, she facilitated our access to village communities, carrying out interviews and translating – where this was necessitated. She and the first author are native to the country and **between them speak Sinhala, Tamil and English. One is bilingual (fluent in English and Sinhala) and has a passive knowledge of Tamil from previous research carried out in Tamil-speaking areas in the country; the other, fluent in Tamil and with a working knowledge of English and Sinhala.** Hence, we avoided the challenges of being "outsider" researchers and yet had to negotiate the insider/outsider to the specifics of the local space. **As a paper authored by four researchers, two authors came on board in late 2017 to help gather and analyse policy documents and evaluate the empirical data collected. They helped overcome failures that**

Harrowell, Davies and Disney (2018) outline due to the unexpected departure and data collection gaps by another junior researcher, meant having to compose a partially different research team to help finalize the research. We were all cognisant, however, of our own contested positionality vis-à-vis the fragile politics in Sri Lanka. In conversation with each other, we frequently reflected on how the undertaking and completion of research is not just messy but also required deliberations on conducting research from near and far – although these are issues for a paper on methodology.

The research sites extended to cover settlements of Navatkuli, Kaithadi and Kodikamam, and addressed a broad range of themes, interspersed with more open-ended discussions arising from the diverse attitudes towards the state. Our arguments build on 85 unstructured interviews conducted with local villagers, stall-holders, traders, displaced persons, academics, state officials and former combatants, supplemented by empirical observations from the field conducted over this period. As the post-war state was a central actor in the infrastructure schemes implemented in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, we also carried out analysis of various policy documents that were decisive in shaping reconstruction efforts across the country. We reviewed state commissioned reports that moulded the Rajapaksa years alongside NGO assessment reports and newspaper articles that referenced the developmental vision articulated by the post-war state. The Sri Lankan state, however, did not operate in a policy vacuum and geo-political void; even as the Chinese state was a major financier of the infrastructure bonanza in Sri Lanka,<sup>2</sup> policy documents by financial institution lenders – i.e. the World Bank and the ADB (Asian Development Bank) – provided either the financial support or the economic rationale for a large-scale exercise in infrastructure development.

In state planning, roads are often imagined as 'connective infrastructures', professing greater mobility, economic development and political integration (Ennis 2018, Harvey and Knox 2015, Wilson 2004). This thread is found in the *Mahinda Chintana* (2010) policy framework too. The Sri Lankan government confidently assures readers that 'roads improvement will also open up opportunities for national integration and political stability... the government has accorded the highest priority to improving entire network of roads in the country with modern technology' (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2010: 90). During the

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<sup>2</sup> The role of China and its close relationship with the Rajapaksa regime in financing infrastructure projects has been explored elsewhere (see de Alwis 2010; Kelegema 2014; Venugopal 2018).

war, Sri Lanka experienced high levels of growth outside of the war-torn North-East of the country through tea plantations, tourism and export processing, allowing for increases in funding to the military budget. Market liberalisation and privatisation accentuated inequalities and caused a contraction in civilian state employment, but job losses were offset and absorbed by the expanding army following a period of 'military fiscalism' (Venugopal 2018). Neoliberal policies intersected with the war economy in other significant ways. Sanyal (2006) has directed attention to how the specific form of postcolonial capitalism operational in South Asia engenders the generation of wastelands and dispossessed populations, outside the logic of accumulation. Armed violence across the North and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka compounded the geographically uneven patterns of economic growth, with a war-induced wasteland created and perpetuated over three decades. Out of this wreckage, the promise of new roads was to herald a new era, bringing the war-town North back into the fold of 'development'. Such a narrative was instrumental in scripting post-war national identity, even if, in reality, this was not much more than a ruse for factory managers entering the north in pursuit of cheap labour (Ruwanpura 2018). Within this framework, mobility was lauded as the answer to and an integral component of the 'peace dividend' promised in the absence of war (Goodhand 2010; Kadirgamar 2013; Venugopal 2018). Mobility in this context, is assumed to be universal and available to all. However, when the dark reality surfaces that mobility is privy to certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, and as the state seeks to further its legitimacy under the guise of road development, new and recurring insecurities and injustices unravel in aspects of capitalism, territorial politics and militarisation, to which we turn to next in the rest of this paper.

### **Roads to Peace?**

Nearly a decade on from Sri Lanka's emergence out of a bitter and protracted 'ethnic conflict', prospects for reconciliation remains elusive. Contemporary definitions of peace acknowledge how the term refers not just to an absence of overt or direct conflict, but a durable or 'positive peace' build upon dialogue between communities and grounded in mutual respect. This requires a commitment to reconciliation and an absence of structural violence, contingent upon steps to combat material inequalities and address outstanding grievances (De Mel 2007; Keenan 2016; Orjuela et al 2016, Harrowell and Özerdem 2018).



Moreover, despite the cessation of armed combat, competing Sinhala-Buddhist, Muslim and Tamil nationalisms that animated the conflict continue to divide Sri Lanka, acting as the prism through which politics is performed and subjectively experienced (Thiranagama 2013). Whilst successive governments have sought to chart a new path forward, emphasising how economic development will be sufficient to overcome social and political fractures, memories of conflict retain a firm grip on public life. Under the tenure of president Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka was consolidated as a centralised and authoritarian unitary state, and despite initial optimism following the election of Maithripala Sirisena in 2015, the new coalition government has taken few steps to investigate war crimes perpetrated in the conflict or promote ethnic reconciliation. Under the *Yahapaalanaya* ('good governance') agenda, the new government did present a bold plan for transitional justice, adopting a detailed, UN-sponsored resolution on war reparations (Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1), but momentum has since floundered (Orjuela et al 2016; Venugopal 2018; Harrowell and Özerdem 2018).

The internal logic of the military has seeped into popular culture, and 'martial virtue' defines the hegemonic socio-political order (De Mel 2007; see also Hyndman 2015; Klem 2014; Venugopal 2018). Furthermore, elements of the state have securitised certain identities, most visibly Tamil youth and former combatants, and geographical areas (former conflict zones, such as the Vanni),<sup>3</sup> as ever-present threats that must be guarded against through ongoing military supervision and surveillance (Satkunanathan 2016). How, then, are roads apprehended in a context where mistrust and enmity persist?

A senior official of the Roads Development Authority (RDA) in Jaffna assured us that "all countries develop roads first in a post-war context, because it is not only concerned with infrastructure development but also human reconciliation – to shift attitudes and change minds" (3.08.2017). The general public similarly tend to embrace roads, animated by a sense of enchantment and "the idea that political and economic stagnation stem from a missing relation, a gap, that is felt to impede progress" (Harvey 2012: 81, see also Harvey and Knox 2015). As in many other 'developing' nations, the arrival of paved highways has been welcomed by many across Sri Lanka: roads exist as both a symbol and material manifestation of modernity, accelerating the flow and circulation of people, capital, goods, and ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> The Vanni refers to the geographical dry zone in the north-east of Sri Lanka, a sparsely populated territory that was formerly a stronghold for the LTTE.

Citizens of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds frequently espouse enthusiasm for new highways, premised on the anticipation that they would allow for fast, comfortable journeys and greater access to markets and job opportunities. In this respect, many seemed to tacitly accept the narratives propagated by state authorities, although some were more reticent about placing hopes in infrastructure for the reconciliation process.

These accounts, however, largely overlooked the ways in which the construction of roads act to produce and reconfigure space, entrenching the presence and enhancing the visibility of the state, as well as inflicting structural violence on certain bodies through spatial exclusion. Beyond their ability to connect disparate locations and open access up to 'marginal' territories, the arrival of new roads heralds the initiation of 'dividing practices' that exclude, overlook or interrupt the mobility of others (Anand 2006; Fluri & Piedalue, 2017).

The Rajapaksa administration's expressed intention to 'build the nation through infrastructure', following the so-called 'Sri Lanka model' of counter-insurgency combined with early recovery development and stabilisation, has had far reaching consequences. Rather than reach out to disaffected communities, the government sought to consolidate control in the North and East of the country through quelling spaces of unrest and thus "stabilising a victor's peace" (cf. Goodhand 2010). Yet paradoxically, 'stabilisation' holds out the possibility of undermining long-term possibilities for durable peace, insofar as it presupposes an ambivalent and uneven bundle of power relations. Any political concessions around autonomy and federalism was seen to undermine the foundation of the nation. Thus, the state seeking to consolidate its hegemonic position in the period of post-war reconstruction, maintaining a military presence to supervise and monitor securitised populations even as it endeavoured to win popular support and legitimate its rule (Jazeel and Ruwanpura 2009; Authors 2018; Harrowell and Özerdem 2018).

Along the A9, the principal highway linking the war-ravaged North with Sri Lanka's prosperous South, potholes have been replaced with a smoothly paved carpet road, ostensibly fulfilling the pledge to deliver the dream of 'development',<sup>4</sup> and yet, 'many injustices, such as lost land, lost family members, and other disappearances, have been swept under these roads that are meant to demonstrate modernity and prosperity'

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<sup>4</sup> Sanyal (2006: 107) identifies how, with the onset of decolonisation from the 1940s onwards, 'development' came to be perceived as systemic change to be brought about by purposive, rational action on behalf of planners and technocratic experts.

(Hyndman and Amarasingam 2014: 564). As one Muslim woman lamented, 'Yes, we have a better road now, but it is no medicine for the wound in our hearts' (23.06.2017). She spoke of returning to her home after the war to find it ransacked, with all her possessions gone and nothing but an empty floor in their place, whilst a Tamil shopkeeper recounted how, in his hometown Navatkuli, new road construction has been accompanied by the resettlement of fifty Sinhala families from the South as part of a conscious effort by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists to cement a presence in the region. According to his account of events, 'they [Sinhala settlers] came in 2010 after the opening of the Ag, they came at night with the help of army and they settled down here within the one day' (27.02.2017). Such provocations do little to heal the wounds inflicted by decades of war, and the resumption of a State of Emergency (granting additional powers to the police and the military) has only heightened tensions. As part of the hybrid, militarised governance regime operational in the region, all humanitarian and relief programmes were subject to a restrictive vetting and clearance process before proceeding, compounding acquiescence to the priorities and rationale of securitised modes of development. Even now, surveillance practices remain rife, aided and abetted by the military in order to acquire intelligence on the latent Tamil 'threat' and since Easter Sunday (2019) Muslim extremism (Goodhand 2012; Satkunanthan 2016; Orjuela et al 2016; Harrowell and Özerdem 2018; Venugopal 2018).

In this context, the arrival of new roads – often built under the supervision of the military and bound up with processes of displacement and resettlement – breeds a potent mix of suspicions, anxieties, hopes and desires (see also: Thiranagama 2013; Kelegama 2015). Roads are conceived of as auxiliaries to broader development agendas, designed to stabilise and legitimate political rule in the aftermath of war, as well as bridges for (re-)connection across different ethnic identities. Thiranagama (2012) shows how railway lines and train journeys similarly enact physical and symbolic representations of stateness, where nonetheless the individual, community and state become entangled. This insight opens up new lines of enquiry, concerning the complex relations between infrastructure, social unrest and processes of brokerage and alliance building within the wider polity. However, the contingent and variable effects of roadbuilding in post-conflict Sri Lanka have yet to be fully explored.

## Capitalism, militarism and mobility

The Sri Lankan state made virtue out of its road network by way of engaging a range of dazzling statistics. For instance, road density, it is claimed, was among the highest in Asia: “the number of road kilometres per population exceeds the related indicators of both Pakistan and of densely populated Bangladesh” (Ministry of Highway and Road Development 2007: 1). The road system was to be elevated as an item of national pride, a symbolic marker of Sri Lanka’s superior development vis-à-vis its neighbours. In this policy discourse, highways are endowed with all the properties required for a modern, ambitious, forward thinking nation; but infrastructural plans remain cloaked in the technocratic language of prudence and responsibility. The state promises to ‘strike a rational balance between the need to maintain, rehabilitate, and modernize Sri Lanka’s road system,’ creating an ‘efficient and competitive’ transport system, aided by ‘a programme monitoring system...that will set targets and determine accountabilities,’ (*ibid*: 5). Such claims seem – at least in part - designed to assuage the concerns of international donors and other ‘development partners’. In practice, however, these assurances have been harder to reconcile with the messy, unsettled experiences of the region’s violent past.

The expectations of economic advancement that roads will bring, as typified in the rhetoric of ‘inclusive’ economic growth and rational development planning, has proven difficult to disentangle from decades of war. As Unruh and Shalaby (2012) highlight, the provision of road infrastructure in fragile, post-war zones is not equivalent to stable settings. There are profoundly different dynamics at play which create new dilemmas and contradictions, especially around land tenure and corruption, and unpredictable outcomes associated with a refusal to engage with the complex realities of communities beset by loss, alienation and economic hardship. The viewpoints manifest in planning documents reflect discredited modernisation theories of unilinear development, whilst overlooking historically constituted inequalities manifested within symbolic and cultural as well as politico-economic fields of power (Harrowell and Özerdem 2018; Authors 2018; Rankin et al 2018). As the war officially ended with defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka entered into an agreement with World Bank for assistance delivering the Emergency Northern Recovery Project (ENREP) to resettle internally displaced persons (IDPs), commence cash-for-work livelihood assistance programmes, and rebuild and expand infrastructure. Concurrently, The Asian Development Bank provided a \$90 million loan to develop 370 km of provincial roads

in the Eastern Province and North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Yet despite the rigorous stipulations for monitoring and evaluation insisted upon by international donors, many Sri Lankans continue to harbour scepticism, claiming that roads in the Jaffna peninsula were constructed to feed the ambitions of local politicians or satisfy external agendas. According to one road construction supervisor working on the Point Pedro Road noted that the process for awarding contract is unashamedly 'political' (i.e. who knows who) and army and naval companies are awarded many contracts. Such perceptions were commonplace and articulated by many residents we encountered in the vicinity of newly built or restored roads. One local trader lamented the elements of political patronage he claimed were decisive in determining priorities around transportation infrastructure:

*If there are any important politician's homes nearby, roads are developed but for our poor rural communities they are not developed. I have informed the DS officer several times about our road problem, but it is of no use...When it is election time, only then do they come and do anything (02.16.2016 Kaithady).*

Suspensions of corruption and vested interests stand at odds with official development narratives, which cater to an audience of international donors by positing roadbuilding as an essential part of the country's economic recovery. Indeed, speculation regarding corruption and kickbacks, particularly through loans from Chinese companies, was a recurrent theme in our conversations, although we do not interrogate the same here. The widespread perception of nepotism and corruption in roadbuilding programmes is indicative of broader class, ethnic and gender dynamics. Its temporality in Sri Lanka's political fabric is captured by Perera-Mubarak (2012) and Orjuela et al (2016) at two distinct moments – post-tsunami and in the immediate aftermath of war. The fact that the technical functions of roads may then be peripheral to the space created for awarding government contracts and enabling patron-client relations to flourish resurfaced (see also Thiranagama 2012). Accordingly, the priorities and agendas of planners and financial institutions may differ significantly from local mobility and transportation needs, contingent upon opaque political networks to benefit allies of the ruling parties and with limited outlets for organised political dissent. Echoing these views, a print shop owner based near Jaffna complained that the Ag had been prioritised for similarly political purposes, with the need for local link roads overlooked:

*If they invest in the Northern Province, the government thinks that funds will go to the LTTE, but this will not go into their hands, even though the state thinks like that; so, there were not any development in the war period. After the defeat of the war, they started with roads. There is a political reason for this: first, they developed the A9 road because there are around 100,000 army personnel in Jaffna, who needed to travel between Colombo and Jaffna and that is why they developed A9 road. Yet, there are a lot roads, internal roads, which are still not developed; these roads are needed for local people...The government didn't consider the people's needs, they considered only their own purposes and development (15.02.2017).*

The prominent role of the military in post-war development extends to commercial enterprise and has stoked further controversies surrounding the takeover of unoccupied and therefore 'vacant' land. Roads hence bring uneven economic effects, because as Hyndman (2004) notes, mobility is political because of the differentiated relationships people have to movement and their capacity for this. For instance, Kadirgamar (2013) shows how faster roads may have expanded markets but they have also undermined local production. Hence, the combination of neoliberal economic policies with centralised and authoritarian forms of social control have taken their toll on local populations; with roads disrupting regional dynamics of the market and production. This rationalising of spatial scales integral to regional power geometries are neglected in nation-building and market connectivity narratives. Or, as Wilson (2004) notes it was multiple routes and pathways, rather than a single highway or major road artery, which ensured that local communities were not impoverished as it eased regional or local autonomy and food security, a point often forgotten by proponents of major road building initiatives.

Roads Development Authority (RDA) trainee engineers who emphasised the increased safety, comfort of journeys between Jaffna and the south, and quicker access to hospital facilities in the capital, evaded the fact that roads may have been designed primarily to benefit affluent urban elites and trading networks, whilst neglecting local needs and difficulties with local transportation links. With the arrival of major new thoroughfares, the situation is somewhat akin to how Scott (1998: 121) describes the newly constructed city of Brasilia: 'there are no streets in the sense of public gathering places; there are only roads and highways to be used exclusively by motorized traffic.' Augmenting existing critiques of

neoliberal growth and development narratives, Gupta (2012) has discussed how bureaucratic logics function in a South Asian context, to generate the appearance of decisive action whilst doing little to remedy structural violence inflicted upon the poor. Micro-practices of corruption become enmeshed with 'normal' bureaucratic procedures and routinised within the minute texture of everyday life (*ibid*: 76). More dramatically, in several well publicised examples, the Rajapaksa regime arrayed public resources as part of a neo-patrimonial state apparatus, awarding contracts to maintain loyalty from its clients and silence critics in the public sphere (Perera-Mubarak 2012, Thiranagama 2012, 2013). Despite the purported desire of the succeeding Sirisena government to start on a clean slate, many development projects proceeded unabated – in part reflecting the multiple scales and dispersed powers of government, bipartisan corruption, the politically significant role of Chinese investment and state-backed loans to fund infrastructure expansion (see Kelegema 2014, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2018, Venugopal 2018). However, these explanations overlook important factors; we find it instructive to scrutinise how these practices are entangled with securitised discourses of nation-building and contested claims of land, identity and belonging.

### **Securing the nation: Infrastructure and its discontents**

Since the war's end, the state has adopted a triumphalist nationalist rhetoric and inculcated a selective remembering of the war through transforming former hideouts, training facilities, and other artefacts of war into touristic sites. This feeds into narratives of war that uncritically celebrates the defeat of LTTE 'terrorists' (Hyndman and Amarasingam 2014), and a majoritarian nationalist discourse, which frames connectivity across Sri Lanka as integral and necessary to 'secure the country' and create dominant imaginative geographies of security (Ojeda, 2013, Harrowell and Özerdem 2018). Politicians staking their legitimacy on the twin tenets of political stability and economic growth mobilise the promise of newly built or redeveloped roads to seek out private investment and encourage Sinhala migration to the Vanni and the Jaffna peninsula. As Masquelier (2002: 833) comments, 'roads serve as maps that support social memory,' and in this way reflect and affirm the hegemonic positions of state power through how they fix and demarcate space, catering to a particular segment of prospective road users and prioritising particular locations. Sinhala-Buddhist settlers in Navatkuli identified roads as having made their lives safer and praised new or revamped highways for making it easier to explore 'our country'. Explicit references to peace

and reconciliation were largely absent from conversations unless prompted, mirroring the tacit silences and words left unspoken in policy discourses. As Ojeda (2013) argues, under the seemingly apolitical narratives, a 'cartography of (in)securities' is carved through processes of militarisation at the expense of others who are left in further precarity from enhanced divisions. Nevertheless, state institutions alternate between these narratives of victory and cautioning against any assumed complacency; there is a *precautionary* element to securitisation, based on combatting potential threats and the notion that conflict could flare up again if constant vigilance is not maintained (Hyndman 2015, Harrowell and Özerdem 2018; see also de Mel 2007).

A visible military presence, maintained in camps and checkpoints stationed along roads and at symbolic sites, exploits Sinhala-Buddhist fears and builds upon the abiding sense of moral anxiety that pervades popular discourse. Roadbuilding is rationalised through tapping into a desire to protect and claim sacred sites whilst simultaneously exploiting the resources channelled into economic recovery and rehabilitation programmes to construct strategic roads of prospective value to the Sinhala dominated military across this predominantly Tamil region (Hyndman 2004; Klem 2014; Spencer 2016). For example, the AB31 road was highlighted as being significant in providing a route from Kodikam and Navatkuli to Mannar, on the Western edge of Sri Lanka's Northern Province. Other key roads in the region included the AB32 (entirely new), the A9 heading south from Jaffna (rebuilt after the war), the B268 which provides an alternative route to the strategic city of Jaffna, and the AB32 leading down to Pooneryn and the Muslim majority southwest. In a region still recovering from war, the uneven spatial benefits arising from these infrastructural forms is guided by the predilection for 'seeing like a state', rendering unruly territories legible through surveillance, mapping and managing space in a way that makes it more amenable to political control by a centralised state apparatus (Scott 1998; see also Ahuja 2004, Thiranagama 2013).

Despite the decisive military victory over the LTTE in 2009, the surveillance and monitoring of securitised populations and territories continues in the former LTTE strongholds of North and Eastern Sri Lanka. Intelligence is gathered by the military through varying techniques including social mapping, enlisting or co-opting community members to participate in military sponsored events, and facilitating the development of civil security committees, which act as surveillance bodies on behalf of the police and contribute towards



an overall atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion between ethnic groups (Satkunanathan 2016). In tandem, the arrival of new expressways and subsequent elimination of journey time between, allows for greater ease of access for the military. The logic of security continues to dominate state decision-making in a manner that evokes the biopolitics of whose security should be protected at the expense and exclusion of others (Ojeda, 2013). Rather than acknowledge the social cleavages exacerbated by surveillance activities, the Sri Lankan state's assumption that economic development can reconcile social differences reflects a long running perspective amongst policymakers who view roads as a means to 'tame and fix' unstable contexts (Harvey and Knox 2015; see also Thiranagama 2012 for railways). As Goodhand (2010) observes, "peace and stability, like development, are not value-neutral terms. Rather, they are hegemonic projects at the heart of which lie questions of politics and power and whose definition of peace and stability prevails" (2010: 344). Acquiescence to military authority remains indispensable for obtaining permission to travel, and amid a context of resurgent ethno-nationalism, roads must be understood as in keeping with the state's desires to consolidate territorial sovereignty over an imagined 'primordial homeland' (Kelegama 2015, Thiranagama 2012). The invocation of safety and security is contingent upon a process of essentialising and 'othering' the defeated Tamil population, contributing to a process of *Sinhalisation*, and incorporating formerly remote regions into the totalising project of national development.

Within this lens, road infrastructure can be viewed as an indelible aspect of 'spatializing the state' and extending 'stateness'; roads like railways then represent the state in all its contradictions (Thiranagama, 2012). It reifies its presence through 'vertical encompassment' to naturalise a sense of authority and legitimacy within unruly territories (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). It follows that greater mobility precipitates socio-political transformation, as roads order and guide and order the circulation and flow of populations, goods and ideas but can concomitantly undermine the power of others (see also Thiranagama 2012).

Roads become a mechanism for demarcating state-space, legitimised through legal instruments, such as the principle of *eminent domain*,<sup>5</sup> to access land and mark it out as within

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<sup>5</sup> Under the principle of eminent domain, a product of Western legal systems and bequeathed to the world through colonialism and empire, land can be acquired for development projects deemed in the national interest through compulsory purchase. In Sri Lanka, this principle is ratified under the Land Acquisition Act of 1950.

the purview of the Roads Development Authority (RDA), the Sri Lankan military and others. Engaging with this conceptual terrain requires us to consider how infrastructure development is constitutive of 'nested practices of state formation' (see Rankin 2018: 289). In disaggregating the state, we recognise that its multiple constituent parts do not operate as a coherent entity; multi-layered structures of bureaucracy and governance produce uneven and contradictory effects as laws and statutes are (re)interpreted and (re)negotiated at different scales (Gupta 2012). In this scenario, it becomes invaluable to recognise "how local cultural codes constitute a regulatory force in their own right, which in turn have a constitutive role to play in shaping the practices of the fragmentary, patronage-oriented local state" (Rankin et al, 2018: 292). Roadbuilding priorities and agendas are far removed from their purported beneficiaries, and the attendant grievances reflect the sense of disconnect between political promise and citizens' lived realities. As one member of a local women's group put it bitterly, 'We need internal [rural link] roads first because without them we cannot even use the main roads!' Others expressed frustration at the lack of attention to local road infrastructure, and the failure of authorities to respond to multiple requests from the community to secure additional funding provide a link road to Kaithady, leaving them reliant on uncertain funding from NGO sources. Such awkward and messy realities reveal ongoing practices of exclusion, gender and class-based inequalities, raising questions about whose mobility needs are being met.

### **Contested landscapes: The territorial politics of roads**

The military-state's efforts to formalise and manage strategic points of entry and exit can be viewed as constitutive of what we might define as territorialisation, a process through which the state acts to consolidate control, by rearranging and regulating both people and space, and 'proscribing or prescribing specific activities within spatial boundaries' (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 388). Through facilitating Sinhala-Buddhist resettlement in once remote and 'disconnected' Tamil majority regions, roads may further inflame grievances as land acquisition and displacement occur. Often, land acquisition has not been awarded much compensation; instead, the government employed a discourse of moral responsibility for citizens to give over land, framing the issue as a patriotic duty. While the *Mahinda Chinthana* policy document cultivates a sense of unity and collective advancement: (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2010), our fieldwork encounters painted a different picture

from this optimistic outlook. Over 300,000 Tamils were displaced following the recapture of LTTE-controlled territories by Sri Lankan army between 2006 and 2009 (Amnesty International 2009), enabling the military to occupy 'vacant' land, and road construction has played its part in catalysing such changes.

Tamil women from Kaithady and the surrounding area informed us that they knew of friends who returned from refugee camps in the aftermath of war, only to find Sinhalese families living on their land. These new settlements were fenced and guarded by military personnel or had military personnel living in these settlements (see also Klem 2014). The women accused the government of inviting – even incentivising – Southern families to relocate to the North and dent the Tamil population, although the government would not admit this. This echoes other complaints we heard, the argument that this was part of attempts to divide the North and the East. Similar experiences were documented elsewhere, such as in Kepapulava, where land was taken by the military, rendering many local Tamils with no claim to their own property. In one formerly disconnected and marginal locale in the Vanni, houses had been constructed on 'empty' land for fifty families along with a Buddhist temple by the *Sihala Ravaya* organization, consolidating a Sinhala-Buddhist presence in what had historically been a predominantly Tamil area. According to one woman shop-owner interviewed (27.02.2017) near Jaffna:

*It is 50 families [relocated] there but there are only houses with names, only 15 or 20 peoples are actually there. Most of the families do not live here permanently, as there is no school for their children. Most of the Sinhala families in the area had been living in Maniyanthottam. The houses they live in were built by the Sinhala Ravaya organization. A temple also stands there now, also built by the same organization...it's government land but before the military there were LTTE cadres and after that local peoples lived there, but those people were relocated in another place by the GS. So, peoples are scared of the GS, because now the Sinhala peoples came and settled down here but still there are so many Jaffna people living without their own land.*

Land tenure regimes are disrupted during war, when families are displaced or flee to safety leaving it unclear who has the rights to land. This creates an opportunity for reconstruction to benefit certain groups aligned with power-holders (Baird and le Billon

2012; Unruh and Shalaby 2012). According to road engineers involved in highway construction, compensation packages were introduced only at the behest of the World Bank and rolled out in a patchy and inconsistent manner. Others excoriated the dispossession and displacement associated with roads:

*With road widening comes land acquisition - so we lose our lands. Nearly all the roadside areas were agricultural lands – so the roads reduced our livelihood income. Another problem is cutting trees, we planted big trees along the roadside but when the government comes and builds the roads they destroy the trees, which also impacts our lifestyle and climate (09.08.2017).*

Such testimony signals to the violent ruptures - and the abiding sense of loss, as much as the anticipation for what will follow - that accompanies the spread of road networks. The disruptive consequences mentioned inspires reflections on what has been rendered invisible, overlooked or neglected in the process of devising and 'rationalising' national planning strategies into a supposedly coherent techno-economic model (Scott 1998). Yet, as Thiranagama (2013) reveals, these moments also show how the people will claim the state in unanticipated ways because of the ways in which the war, the LTTE and the militarized nature of the Sri Lankan polity. Notwithstanding, however, Sanyal's (2007) depiction of violent rupture arising from ongoing primitive accumulation similarly resonates in this context. Indeed, 'becoming modern...is a process fraught with ambiguity...the process also entails breaking away from an immanent 'past' in which personal and communal identities were safely anchored through the ordering of physical space' (Masquelier 2002: 833). Resettlement was closely aligned with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; the houses and temple were built by the *Sinhala Ravaya* organization, whose ideological dispositions – furthering an exclusionary discourse of Sinhala-Buddhist superiority - concerned other residents. Dissatisfaction with the resettlement process manifested in a two-week long protest in the community of Muliathivu, with women and children at the forefront demand that their land be returned. The protestors claimed the model village in which they had been resettled lacked crucial infrastructure (water, sanitation and electricity) and, more significantly, access to arable land for farming or rivers for fishing on which livelihoods depended. For rural households with livelihoods are based around farming, land along the saline lagoon was less

fertile and thus, less desirable. In poor Tamil majority villages neighbouring the new highway, the state/army assumed control of plots of land formerly occupied by LTTE during the war, before preparing them for resettlement by Sinhalese migrants. Initially, Sinhala settlers arrive, migration endorsed under the auspices of the military and encouraged by the state through tax incentives, then gradually, accompanied by new markers of Sinhalese identity, such as Buddhist temples and statues. However, this activity produced varying effects on the local population, prompted by different experiences of the war and expectations of what a post-war country should look like. Narrative wove together Sinhala claims of territorial sovereignty – triumphant references to ‘our land’ – with some degree of resignation for rural Tamils.

## **Conclusion**

Through analysing the process of post-war recovery underway in Sri Lanka’s devastated Northern region, we have sought to illuminate how the construction of new roads is used by the state to exercise power and consolidate its presence into formerly hostile territories. By interrogating the militarised discourse of ‘securing the nation’ that accompanies roadbuilding projects; and juxtaposing such narratives with the articulation of diverse local perspectives and observations garnered from the field, we aim to contribute the emerging body of literature exploring how emergent socio-political formations find resonance in the physical transformation of space in post-war settings. As Sri Lanka navigates its transition out of ethnic conflict, roadbuilding constitutes an important arena for the state to win popular support and consolidate its rule, with the anticipation of greater connectivity and economic opportunity bolstering support for infrastructure programmes. However, in projects ostensibly designed for the purposes of promoting ethnic reconciliation and the political integration of Tamil and Muslim communities, the motives and priorities of Sri Lanka’s bureaucratic state often do not align with locally identified priorities. Whilst in part fulfilling the promise of mobility and contributing to the reconstruction of the shattered Vanni region, roads simultaneously function to extend state territorial control, rendering permissible a more active involvement of the military-state apparatus amid persistent mistrust and concern at resurgent Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism.

Despite official proclamations lauding ‘development’ as a substitute for transitional justice and a shortcut to peace, our research suggests a misalignment with the lived

experiences and political priorities of the new roads' supposed beneficiaries. The roadbuilding programme, thus far, has spoken to two particular segments of the country's population – Sri Lanka's capitalist class, whose desire for greater mobility is contingent upon increasing access to markets, and Sri Lanka's militarized state, who between them comprise a core support base of the national government. The emergent socio-political formations arising from roads deliver uneven benefits and compel some households to give up land and acquiesce to resettlement programmes. The preoccupation with economic growth as a route to stabilisation overlooks the limits of economic power in reconciling social fractures within a population still traumatised, resentful and marred by the effects of war. As such, newly paved highways have cemented inequalities, through a selective memory and commemoration of war celebrating the downfall of the LTTE, and a precautionary development-security nexus, which has dominated decision-making. It is therefore unclear that roads and economic growth can act as a substitution for the more difficult but necessary work of critical introspection, addressing reparations, truth and reconciliation required in the aftermath of war. The logic of securitisation – which insists on invasive state surveillance and resettlement as necessary in the face of a latent Tamil and increasing Muslim 'threat' – is antithetical to such a process.

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